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SUBJECT: MALAYSIAN YOUTH POLL REVEALS SHARP ETHNIC DIVIDE
AND POLITICAL APATHY

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 1547

[1](#)B. KUALA LUMPUR 1516

[1](#)C. KUALA LUMPUR 365

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark for reasons 1.4 b,
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Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) A recent opinion poll, funded by The Asia Foundation, of over 1,500 young Malaysian adults aged 18-32 showed sharp differences of views on religion and national identity and the relation between state and religion among the country's three largest ethnic groups - the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The majority of Malays, defined under law as Muslims, identified themselves first as Muslims and secondarily as Malaysians, in stark contrast to the other ethnic groups. In addition, Malays exhibited far greater willingness to involve the government in religious affairs. About a third of all Malay respondents hoped that Malaysia would become "more Islamic" and supported adoption of Islamic (hudud) statutes for criminal offenses. Less than a third of Malays surveyed supported equal rights for all cultures and religions. The survey found common ground across ethnic boundaries in terms of Malaysian youths' high degree of cynicism toward elected officials, apathy about current affairs and political disengagement. Over 40 percent of respondents would forgo elections in exchange for government-guaranteed peace, stability and economic growth. The survey's results highlighted the strong sense of Malay/Muslim identity and illustrated the sharp inter-ethnic differences that will continue to work against the emergence in Malaysia of a large multi-ethnic, multi-religious political party. Post has forwarded the complete survey data to EAP/MTS. End Summary.

Survey Background and Respondent Demographics

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Merdeka Center for Opinion Research provided foreign diplomats on September 22 with recent opinion survey results about current attitudes of young Malaysians. The Merdeka Center is a for-profit, independent opinion polling organization that has focused on socio-economic issues in Malaysia since its establishment in 2001. It is owned by two private sector individuals. The organization is largely funded through polling contracts with domestic and international sponsors, including project-specific USG grants totaling \$56,000 in 2006 from the International Republican Institute. Diplomats received the survey with great interest, as the government supplies few statistics broken down by ethnicity. In addition, the government-controlled mainstream media does not typically fund or publish surveys

that illustrate differing attitudes of Malays, Chinese and Indians - especially concerning sensitive topics such as race and religion.

¶3. (U) The Asia Foundation (TAF) funded the Merdeka Center's latest telephone survey that was based on interviews with over 1,500 young adult Malaysians aged 18-32. Participants were selected at random from every state. The survey was designed to acquire a better understanding of the perceptions of Malaysian young adults toward their society, and to quantify their level of interest and engagement on civic issues affecting the country. The survey was conducted between May 24 and June 7 and had a 3.1 percent margin of error. The respondents' religious breakdown roughly mirrored that of Malaysia's overall population, with 60 percent Muslim, 16 percent Buddhist, 11 percent Christian, and 7.5 percent Hindu. The participants' ethnic breakdown also mirrored that of Malaysia, with 58 percent Malay, 25 percent Chinese, 8 percent Indian, and 9 percent indigenous. Over 40 percent were students, with 29 percent employed in the private sector, 8 percent employed by the government, 8 percent unemployed and 6 percent self-employed. Those aged 18-23 comprised 58 percent of respondents. Participants were equally divided by gender, slightly more urban than rural, and 80 percent were single. TAF expressed interest in using the survey's results as a baseline from which to complete future surveys and conduct trend analyses.

Role of Religion - Significant Ethnic Divide

¶4. (SBU) The TAF-funded survey pointed out stark divisions along ethnic lines regarding the role of religion in daily life. Malays identified much more strongly with their religion (Islam), compared to the other two ethnic groups.

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Sixty-one percent of Malays considered themselves Muslim first, with only 28 percent identifying themselves first as Malaysians. The Chinese put ethnicity first (47 percent), followed by nationality (44 percent) and religion (5 percent). Indians were the most nationalistic, with 75 percent identifying themselves first as Malaysians, followed by their ethnic group (14 percent) and religion (5 percent). When asked whether they rely upon their religion when making major life decisions, 92 percent of Malays and 85 percent of Indians answered affirmatively, while only 37 percent of Chinese agreed. Only 9 percent of Malays agreed that "it is not wrong for unmarried couples to hold hands in public places," compared with 96 percent of Chinese and 58 percent of Indians.

¶5. (SBU) With regard to the connection between government and religion, only 3 percent of Malay respondents agreed that "government and religion should be kept separate," compared with 64 percent of Chinese and 47 percent of Indians. Thirty-four percent of Malays agreed that "government should increase the implementation of Islam by introducing hudud law for Muslims," compared with only 2 percent of Chinese and 0 percent of Indian respondents. (Note: hudud, or Islamic law encompassing criminal offenses, currently does not apply to any Malaysians; all citizens are subject to a secular criminal law system.) Thirty percent of Malays hoped Malaysia would become "more Islamic," while that outcome was supported by 0 percent of Chinese and 4 percent of Indians. Only 31 percent of Malays agreed that "all cultures and religions should be given equal rights," compared with 61 percent and 66 percent of Chinese and Indian respondents, respectively. A majority of Malays (53 percent) stated that they would not accept a woman as prime minister, compared with only 11 percent of Chinese and 6 percent of Indians.

Dismissive View of Politics

¶6. (SBU) The survey included various questions that attempted

to determine the greatest concerns of respondents, as well as their degree of awareness about local and global political affairs. The young adults surveyed were primarily concerned with completing their education, advancing their careers and supporting their families. According to the Merdeka Center, "only a handful" expressed concern about wider societal issues. In its summary report about its survey, the Merdeka Center concluded that "a majority of youth tend to have a negative, cynical and dismissive view about politics." The survey indicated that most of Malaysia's young adults remain disengaged from their political environment. When asked how frequently they discuss "government policies and current issues" with friends, family members, school mates or colleagues, the most frequent responses were once per week (43 percent), once per month (26 percent), and rarely/never (17 percent). Respondents placed high value on holding elections, but 41 percent would agree to eliminate elections if the government could guarantee "stability, peace and economic growth."

Activities and Interests

17. (SBU) Malaysia's young adults, like those in many other nations, appear to focus largely on advancing their educations or careers, and pay significant attention to their families and home environment. When asked an open-ended question about how they spend their free time, the young adults listed "stay at home" as their primary response (34 percent), with "shopping complexes" (15 percent), "sports venues/fields" (6 percent), "scenic areas" (6 percent) and "go to town" (6 percent) as the next most popular responses. Favorite hobbies were reading (24 percent), sports (23 percent), listening to music (9 percent), watching television or movies (8 percent), and fishing (6 percent). Only 26 percent have visited another country, with nearby Singapore the most common destination by far. Fifty-three percent of respondents stated they have no access to the Internet, and only 15 percent said they accessed the Internet 6 or more times per week. Mobile phone penetration was significantly higher, with 86 percent of respondents owning at least one of the devices.

Comment

18. (C) Malaysia's controlled and often stolid political environment feeds and reinforces the high degree of political and civic disengagement noted by the survey. In decisions dating back to the 1960s, Malay-dominated governments have eliminated local elections, maintained tight political content control over the country's mainstream media, banned

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political activities at universities, maintained a pervasive political and economic patronage system that damages meritocracy-based advancement for non-Malays (refs A, B and C), and more recently warned Internet news providers of retaliation for publishing anti-government or religiously "sensitive" content. Political openings in the post-Mahathir era, while positive, have not dramatically changed the situation. This unique survey illustrates some of the underlying drivers of Malaysia's racial and religious tensions. While those tensions appear to be growing, they still remain well under control by regional standards. The survey highlighted the sharp inter-ethnic differences that work against the emergence in Malaysia of a large, multi-racial, multi-religious political party capable of challenging the status quo. If, as the survey strongly indicates, the younger generation of Malaysians is so deeply divided along lines of race and religion, ethnic based politics will remain a dominant feature of Malaysia's political landscape for the foreseeable future.

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